

Never Have I Ever by 2Dglasses

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Summary: Six months after The Battle of Starcourt, Joyce takes Will, Jonathan and El back to Hawkins to visit their friends. The gang play 'Never Have I Ever' only to learn that there is still so much they don't know about their mysterious little telekinetic friend.

1. Long Time Ago

The Byers came to visit Hawkins for the first time since leaving six months ago. Joyce thought enough time had passed since she and her kids, and she included El when she said that, had left behind the madness that had happened on that faithful 4th of July. It wasn't easy. Not only had she herself witnessed the death of a man she had known for most of her life, a man she had began to see a future with, she also had three children who had seen things that no child should ever have to see.

Jonathan had been having issues with his back ever since facing off against Bruce and Tom in the hospital with Nancy. Not to mention having to leave her.

Will could no longer feel the cold chill of the Mind Flayer bite at the back of his neck, but that didn't mean he didn't still have a whole kaleidoscope of memories of the horrors he was made experience for the past two years. And of course, leaving his best friends at such a crucial moment in his life was not ideal.

Then there was El. Joyce hadn't thought twice when she took in the girl; Hopper's daughter. But her lack of inhibitions meant that she hadn't fully known what taking care of this damaged little person would entail. She was with Hopper when they met her aunt and mother. They had visited the laboratory multiple times and had met Doctor Brenner. She didn't know the extent of El's cruel upbringing in the lab, but she had been able to piece together little bits from how she behaved and reacted to certain situations. Then she also had what the girl had went through last July; from the beatings she took from the Mind Flayer to losing her father to being separated from Mike.

So now was a good time to visit Hawkins again. For everyone's sake.

Joyce had met up with Murray who had managed to set up another base on the outskirts of Hawkins. Karen let Will, Jonathan and El stay at the Wheeler's with open arms, seeing how happy it made her own kids.

The initial reunion was such a happy moment for everyone. After taking time to get reacquainted, everybody went up to Weathertop. Nancy, Jonathan, Steven and Robin joined the kids on this beautiful winter evening. They had set up a makeshift table next to Cerebro using a beer crate and an old cabinet door.

"Never Have I Ever. You guys know it?"

Dustin asked as he sat down on the grass next to Steve. The teen with the amazing hair was himself setting up one of the portable heaters they had brought to combat the evening chill in the air. Max had set up the other one over beside Nancy.

"Never Have I Ever?"

Will repeated quizzically.

"Yeah, you know the drinking game?"

Steve explained, rubbing his hands together and sitting next to Dustin.

"What? You mean like drink alcohol?"

Nancy asked, concern in her tone.

Robin reached behind Steve into her bag and took out a bottle.

"Tada!"

Jonathan eyed the clear bottle and recognised the label.

"You brought vodka?"

"Aaaaand..."

It was Dustin's voice this time. He also reached around to grab a big bottle of Coke.

"You're in on this too?"

Mike aimed at Dustin.

"Relax. It's not strong if you mix 'em together. According to Steve anyway..."

Mike looked down by his side to see El's furrowed brows knitted together.

"V-Vod-ka?"

"Yeah. It's alcohol. Adults drink it to feel funny."

"Why do they want to feel... funny?"

Mike laughed. It did sound ridiculous the way he explained it.

"I don't know really."

"But we're not adults. Against the rules?"

At his girlfriend's words, Mike glanced over to his big sister, who exchanged a look with Jonathan.

"Whaddaya say, Nance?"

Steve asked, holding up the bottle. Nancy scanned all of the kids waiting faces. They were all almost sixteen, around the same age she had begun to experiment with alcohol. She sighed.

"Alright, but only one cup each. Do you hear me?"

"Yes!"

Dustin shot up and threw a sleeve of plastic cups on the grass. Lucas began handing out the cups for everyone on the table and Robin poured a little of the clear liquid into each one. Dustin then filled the remainder with Coke. El leaned down over her cup and felt the bubbles against her nose. The strong smell of the vodka went straight down her throat.

"Hey."

She glanced up at Mike's voice.

"It's okay if you don't want to play."

She smiled at him.

"I want to."

He took her hand and returned her smile.

"Alright, listen up people. The rules are simple."

Everybody paid attention to Dustin who began to explain.

"We take turns to say something that we've never done before. And if anybody HAS done it, they take a drink."

"Sounds easy enough."

Lucas commented as Max nodded beside him.

"Okay, we'll start clockwise from me. So, Will, you're up."

Dustin instructed, causing Will to shift and clear his throat.

"Oh, uh, let's see... Okay. Never have I ever had detention."

"Cheers!"

Steve immediately held up his cup before taking a drink. Max and Jonathan followed, both grimacing. El looked up at Mike who had just taken a sip himself.

"What is detention?"

He grimaced and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Oh, right. Detention is when you get held back after school."

She blinked up at him, not really understanding. He smiled.

"Don't worry. It's just the first round."

"Lucas, your turn."

He placed his hand over his mouth as he thought. He was being strategic.

"Got it."

He turned to Max who was next to him and looked right into her eyes as he spoke.

"Never have I ever been surfing."

He grinned at her, knowing full well that she had grown up in California.

"Oh, come on. That is SO not fair!"

Max protested through a half smile, secretly admiring her boyfriend's boldness.

"No, it's 'totally tubular, dude.'"

He mocked and watched her take a drink for the second time.

"Alright. That's what we like to see. A bit of strategy."

Steve commended Lucas.

"Mad Max. Go for it."

"Never have I ever... gotten an A in a test."

Lucas immediately turned to her.

"Wait, you've never gotten an A?"

"Really? After that stunt you just pulled, Stalker?"

She reached forward and lifted up his cup to his mouth.

"Drink up, nerd."

She instructed playfully, mimicking Erica's droll. Everybody laughed before Lucas, Will, Nancy, Mike, Jonathan, Robin and Dustin each took a drink. The only ones not to were Max, Steve and El.

"Okay, El. It's your turn."

Steve said causing her to glance over to him.

She hesitated before Max turned to her.

"Just say something you've never done. Anything at all."

She bit her bottom lip as she thought. Mike glanced at Max with an unreadable expression and after a moment El looked up and spoke.

"Never have I ever had... birthday."

There was a silence and the weight behind it was immense. It was then that Mike realised just how much El never had the chance to do. He became incredibly sad and just as El began to think she had done something wrong, Steve made his voice heard.

"So not fair, El!"

"Yeah, making us all drink like this."

Robin added jokingly. They laughed as everybody of course took a drink.

"Good one, Eleven."

Dustin assured her, causing the girl to smile.

"Okay, Mike. You're up."

Mike thought. It was actually quite difficult to come up with something on the spot.

"Never have I ever broken a bone."

"Dammit Mike."

Will muttered, having broken his pinky when he was younger. Max also took a drink, having had many skateboarding accidents. Steve took a drink due to the many fights he had been in. Not to mention his time with the Russians. Robin placed a hand on his knee as he drank. And to everyone's surprise, El reached forward and took her cup, looking down into it before slowly taking a sip. She grimaced as

she swallowed the strong taste.

"What? El, you broke a bone? When?"

Mike asked, completely taken aback. He sifted through his memories of the time he'd spent with her and even after everything that had been done to her at Starcourt, he couldn't recall a time she had broken anything. Maybe when Billy knocked him out...

She placed her cup back on the table and looked up at him. After a moment she lowered her gaze.

"Long time ago."

Was all she said, and he instantly knew what that meant. They all did. It happened back at the lab.

Mike wordlessly took her hand and rubbed his thumb along her knuckles. He leaned into her and kissed her cheek. She simply smiled at him.

Steve glanced over at Dustin and smiled sadly. Robin scanned to see who was sitting next to Mike.

"Alright! Wheeler numero dos. You're up."

Nancy tapped her finger against her lips as she thought.

"Hmmm..."

Jonathan took this moment to admire the smooth angles of his girlfriend's side profile.

"Alright, got it. Never have I ever stayed up for two days straight."

"Ooooh. Nancy coming in outta left field!"

Steve commentated before taking another gulp from his cup. Dustin glanced up at him. He looked back down at the kid who was waiting for an explanation.

"Finals, man. Crammed so much I forgot what sleep even was."

Steve suddenly had a thought.

"Hey, wait a minute, Nance. You're tellin' me you didn't pull a single all nighter?"

She smirked.

"Didn't need to, Harrington. Some people actually kept up a decent GPA."

"Shots fired!"

Lucas exclaimed and everybody laughed as Steve feigned being shot in the chest.

"Alright, who else? Come on you kids, fess up."

Will glanced around before apprehensively taking a sip.

"It was a long campaign."

His tone was dry as he cracked a smile. Mike caught his friend's humorous expression, but was surprised when he saw movement beside him. Again, it was El who shyly took another sip from the cup.

Her dark eyes met his from over the rim of the clear cup.

"El..."

His voice was low, the only other person to hear was Max who exchanged a sad look with Mike. El lowered the cup and blinked at him.

"Long time ago?"

He asked to which she slowly nodded.

Was it from her time alone in the woods? Was it from back at the lab? Was it from the nightmares that he was sure she was plagued with every night?

There wasn't sadness in her eyes. There was emptiness. As if she had just been dealing with these memories all this time. Mike and the

Party had only known Eleven for the past two years. There were twelve years of her life that nobody other than her and the people from that lab had known of.

There was so much they actually didn't know about her.

2. As a Kite

"Jonathan, it's your turn, man."

Steve reminded the older Byers who was next to his girlfriend.

"Oh, right. Well, um..."

He thought, tapping his finger on his plastic cup.

"Okay. Never have I ever been high."

Immediately, Steve and Robin looked at each other before snickering together and taking a drink.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

Nancy lamented. Steve shot her a glance.

"Hey, it wasn't exactly our choice, alright?"

He clarified in their defense, although it didn't actually make anything clearer. Hence the silence.

Dustin, sensing everyone's confusion did the honours.

"Remember when we mentioned a bunch of Russians back at the mall?"

"Yeah."

Mike acknowledged.

Robin then took the lead.

"They kinda... sorta drugged me and Steve."

"Wait, seriously? Erica never told me that..."

Lucas commented causing Dustin to turn to him.

"You should've seen 'em. They were like toddlers."

"Shit..."

Jonathan spoke lowly.

After a moment, Max coughed awkwardly and took a drink herself.

"Huh?"

Lucas turned to his girlfriend, scandalized.

The red-head blinked up at him and sighed.

"Look, it was back in California and... Billy left some pot in his room so... I tried it."

She hesitated at her brother's name.

"Damn. That's hardcore."

Steve smiled at her. Lucas was kind of impressed.

"You're just full of surprises, Mad Max."

He put his arm around her and smiled down into her blue eyes.

"What is high?"

El's small voice danced through the night air. Mike glanced down at her and thought for a moment.

"It's like this feeling you get when... when-"

It was difficult for him to explain a feeling he's never felt.

Sensing his struggle, Max helped out.

"Hey, El."

She turned to her best friend.

"You've seen people smoke before, right?"

The girl nodded.

"Hop smoked all the time."

It stung. Hearing words in the past tense when talking about Hopper.

Max continued.

"Right, well sometimes people smoke special cigarettes."

"Special? How?"

"It's like something extra that makes you feel funny."

Eleven narrowed her eyes, doing her best to make sense of what she was hearing.

"So, you smoked special cigarette in California."

"Uh-huh."

Max nodded.

"And you felt funny."

El clarified.

Max chuckled.

"Yeah, very funny."

The brunette nodded to herself at Max's explanation. She then turned to Steve.

"So special cigarette is a drug. You said you were high. You said 'drugged.'"

Steve was slightly taken aback at the girl's directness. He hadn't had a whole lot of interaction with Eleven. He knew that she was stunted in many ways, but she still managed to surprise him every now and then.

"Well, you see El, Robin and I, we uh... we weren't really given a choice. That's what 'drugged' means."

His Scoops Ahoy co-worker saw the girl listening intently and continued.

"The Russians wanted information from us so they gave us a drug to make us tell them."

El blinked heavily.

"Bad men."

Steve nodded.

"Yeah. Bad men."

Eleven's comparison made Mike uneasy. He looked at her and could see her mind racing.

The other kids were starting to get a horrible feeling in their stomachs. They hadn't really heard much about what had happened to the Scoops Troop in the Russian base as they were too busy trying to fight off the Mind Flayer. But they had seen Steve's face that's for sure.

"Not special cigarette."

El said.

"No... Do you know what an injection is?"

Robin asked the girl.

Eleven hesitated.

"Not a good feeling."

Her tone was picked up as a question by most of them. Mike, however, felt the presence beside him shift.

Steve looked at Robin.

"No, El. Not a good feeling."

Despite them being able to see lights dance above them at the mall

and having spent half the evening laughing together, the look they shared with one another was a mutual expression of something that was forced upon them being unwanted.

Dustin thought back to the image of both of them rolling around on the floor in the elevator, trying desperately to get them under control. He didn't show it at the time, but he was terrified. And he knew Erica was too.

"Feels heavy."

Everybody glanced over at El who was just gazing through unfocused eyes at the grass.

"Like nothing and... everything. At the same time."

Mike saw the way the girl's brows were slightly tensed. He exchanged a worried glance with his big sister who, herself, knelt forward and placed a hand on her little brother's knee.

"El. How do you know what it feels like?"

They knew. They all knew, but Nancy asked anyway.

Mike saw his girlfriend's eyes blink heavily and her nostrils flare. He took her hand in his and held as tight as he could. Max instinctively took Lucas' hand in her own and felt his grip tighten around hers. Will looked to his big brother who gave him a sad look in return. Dustin rubbed his hand over his mouth and exchanged a glance with Steve and Robin.

"Couldn't sleep."

She spoke without looking up from the ground.

"You couldn't sleep? They gave you something to make you sleep?"

Mike asked.

Will immediately felt a sting in his arm. Thinking back to being in the lab and then waking up in darkness. He gulped away the lump that had begun to form in his throat.

"No."

El replied, furrowing her brow.

"Against the rules."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. Mike felt like he had been punched in the stomach.

"They told me to lift. Lift the block. I couldn't... Too heavy... too tired..."

Max's eyes became misty fast and she felt tears form over her eyelids.

"Drugged."

She repeated the new word she had just learned from Steve.

"Stay awake. Try again. Keep trying."

Dustin looked down by El's leg to see that she was clutching some blades of grass in her hand. The one that wasn't being held by Mike's.

"I lifted... Then... the next day... they told me. Lift two blocks."

This was awful.

Lucas suddenly thought about the time that El had flipped the van and how awesome that was. But now knowing what she had been put through to be able to do that, he felt his eyes begin to sting himself.

They had all seen her do incredible things. Flinging cars, lifting weights, ripping a giant monster in half. They hadn't really questioned exactly 'how' she could. They knew she grew up in Hawkins lab, but nothing more.

"If I couldn't. Injection. Bad feeling and then I can."

Her vocabulary had regressed ever so slightly since Hop was gone. She hadn't really spoken much since then.

"Sometimes it didn't work so, um... different drug."

"Different?"

Jonathan asked, voice full of concern.

El hesitated.

"Different feeling. Papa said... it will make your mind bigger. It will make you stronger..."

She quoted the man who she once knew as her father. Mike felt hatred bubble in his chest. Remembering how that bastard held her face in his hands and spoke to her like she was his little child. He hated that man with every fiber of his being.

"They 'drug' me and... put me in the... dark room."

She closed her eyes and spoke in an almost whisper. Max, Will and Nancy had tear tracks running down their cheeks. The rest weren't far behind.

"Like the void. Can see... everything."

Nobody said anything. Nobody could. Ever since learning of El's origin, they had all let their imaginations create what they thought could have happened to their friend in the lab, but none of them could create images as cruel as what had just been described to them.

And then for the first time in minutes, Eleven blinked out of her blurred gaze.

"I have to drink now?"

3. The Storm

Jonathan hadn't anticipated his turn becoming as dark as it had. When he thought of the word 'high', El was the last person he would have associated with it.

The surprising and disturbing outcome further solidified for everyone that even if they were to try to be careful, the child known as Eleven could very well have some warped and twisted experience with pretty much anything. And at the same time, could have absolutely no experience with something that was innocent and common for most kids her age or even younger.

Eleven rarely opened up, so despite the fact that learning what little they could about her past was difficult and shocking, there was a sense of morbid curiosity about it all. Especially for Mike.

He never asked her about anything that happened before they met as he assumed she would want to leave it behind her. He once told her that he would be there if and when she was ever ready to talk about it. But as she hadn't yet, he figured she probably never would.

El had learned slowly that how she grew up was so inherently wrong from meeting Mike and the Party and Joyce and from living with Hopper. Hop never physically hurt her. Hop always fed her. Hop never made her do things she clearly didn't want to do.

It was only after she learned all of this that she could appreciate how Mike treated her when they first met. She knew that the boy must have had a million questions about her when they first found her in those woods. But he focused all of his energy on making sure she was warm and safe.

She would always be thankful to him for that.

And now, as they sat next to each other on the grass, with a heaviness still present in the air after El's explanation moments previous, Mike began to wonder.

Did El really want to play this game? Did she feel like she had to tell

everyone about her past because it was part of the rules?

"You okay?"

He whispered to her as he gently brushed his thumb along her smooth hand. She turned to him and nodded once, a slight smile present on the edge of her lips, but not fully making it to her eyes.

"Alright. Who's next, huh?"

Steve followed around the messy circle they had positioned themselves in.

"Dustin, looks like you're up, buddy."

He had been deep in thought about everything Eleven had said before.

"Oh, right um... Alright, let me think..."

Having nothing prepared made it so difficult to think of something to say. He wracked his brain to come up with something he had never done before. Then it hit him.

He laughed at what he was about to say.

"This kinda goes for most of us, okay? Never have I ever grown up."

He glanced up and scanned through the Party, smiling at each of them. His gummy smile extended to the others, causing them to laugh.

They each thought about what they had all been through over the past two years and how if you stepped back it almost seemed hilariously ridiculous.

And nobody drank.

"It's true, Dusty Bun. I don't think any of us have really grown up yet."

Steve said as he looked up at the boy.

"Will... I think most of all."

Mike's strong voice surprised the younger Byers boy.

"You never had the chance and I'm really sorry about that."

He smiled sadly at his best friend to which Will exchanged an appreciative look. Lucas nodded sadly in agreement.

"Not just me. Eleven too. Even more than me."

Will added and shared a look of understanding with the girl with the dark eyes.

"Or maybe it's the opposite."

Nancy commented.

"Maybe we've all been forced to grow up too fast."

Jonathan listened to his girlfriend speak and nodded slowly to himself.

"I mean, think about it. All the shit we've seen and the oldest of us... Steve, you're what? Eighteen."

Put in perspective like that, it actually was insane how much this group of kids had been through.

"Yeah, you're right, Nance."

Steve agreed as he held his cup in his hand that rested on his knee, swishing the now half filled alcohol around.

"So I guess you could say we've all seen some shit, right? Regardless of our ages."

Dustin spoke and glanced around at everyone. There was a shared silence which confirmed what he had said.

And after a moment, everybody drank. There were some coughs and grimaces as the strong liquid was consumed.

"Okay, my turn!"

Robin put up her hand playfully. Steve smiled at her movement. He knew her well enough by now to know that she was trying to keep the tone light. Yes, she became part of their group that had been forged through trauma only recently, but even what was unspoken about from before, she could feel just being in everybody's presence.

After everything that happened at Starcourt and after Steve and Robin we're finally able to change out of those ridiculous uniforms, he sat her down and told her what he knew about everything that happened to Will and about Eleven.

Considering that she had seen the giant flesh monster and also the telekinetic girl throw a car at a bunch of Russians, she didn't really have a hard time believing him.

So by this stage, she was just trying to have some fun.

"Ready?"

She scanned her audience in anticipation. She had obviously prepared for her turn.

"Never have I ever stayed indoors for a week straight."

Her enthusiasm was goofy and infectious and made it seem like she had a motive, but Steve turned to her immediately.

"Nah, nah, nah. You can't give us that bullshit, Ms Robin."

She turned to him, scandalized.

"What? Why not, Dingus?"

"The storm... five years ago? Any of this ringing a bell?"

"That's right, yeah. Lasted almost a whole week."

Jonathan remembered.

"See, even Johnny agrees with me. There's no way you were out in

that."

Robin had a smug look on her face.

"Well, that's where you're wrong my friend, because me and my family were out of town that week. Leaving all you losers to suffer back here in sunny old Hawkins."

"Good one, Robin. Totally forgot about 'The Great Storm of 1980.'"

Dustin smiled and drank prompting the others to follow suit, each remembering the misery as they stared out their bedroom windows at the pouring rain that depressing week five years ago.

"God, don't remind me. That week sucked. You're lucky you lived in Cali back then, Max."

The red-head smirked at Lucas in triumph.

Steve finished off his cup and tossed the empty plastic on the grass beside him before looking up. What he saw stopped him in his tracks.

Eleven sighed quietly and slowly drank from her cup as Mike had his hand on her knee, watching her sadly.

"Jeez, El. I'm sorry."

Suddenly everyone felt guilty as they momentarily forgot in their personal despair of being trapped indoors for a whole week during a storm, that Eleven had spent practically her whole life indoors. Her whole life had been the storm.

She glanced up and smiled sadly.

"It's okay. Outside now."

Her admirably positive outlook and cute expression filled the teens heart with warmth, prompting him to share her smile. He was very fond of Eleven. Seeing her for the first time at the Byers house after having saved everyone from the Demodog to being saved again back at the mall and witnessing her withstand the pain of having her leg cut open and a hand shoved into it, this kid really was something

else.

"Steve, it's your turn. You're the last one."

Nancy broke him from his thoughts. As he looked at everybody's faces sitting around under those night stars, he saw the faces of a group of kids who had been through a war. Several wars. But they didn't look broken.

Worn and damaged, yes, definitely. But not broken. And in that moment he felt something deep in his chest.

"Never have I ever been more proud to be hanging out with a bunch of losers like you."

His warmth spread around the whole group. Eleven glanced up at Mike and rested her head on his shoulder. The Wheeler boy smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Jonathan rested his hand on Nancy's knee who smiled at him in return. Dustin chuckled and patted Will on his back to which the Byers boy laughed at. Max playfully hit Lucas in the arm and the other boy smiled and feigned being hurt. Robin looked at Steve sitting beside her and nodded warmly at him.

"I know it's pretty much the opposite of what we should be doing but, hey I'll drink to that."

Dustin said as he raised his glass. Everyone followed his action and finished their drinks with him.

Then there was a comfortable silence in the air as the group sat relaxed up on the hill under the moonlight. They savoured the peaceful moment as it was rare that they were all together and for them not to be in imminent danger from being maimed or killed.

Not now. This was perfect.

4. Torture

It was about 11pm by the time the group split and headed their separate ways. Joyce had arranged with Karen for Will and El to stay with Mike during their time back in Hawkins.

Despite it being pretty much all of the kids' first times drinking alcohol, they weren't drunk at all. Some of them were a little buzzed, but nothing more.

Mike led his best friend and his girlfriend down into that familiar basement and they both collapsed onto the couch. The Wheeler boy had run upstairs to say goodnight to his Mom and to grab some blankets. He returned and threw everything on the floor before sitting down beside them both.

El laid her head against the chair back and just stared lazily up through heavy lids. Will reached down and took a pillow, placing it on his lap.

"It was fun hanging out with everyone again."

The younger boy stated, smiling.

Mike turned sideways and shifted one leg up on the cushion so that he could face them both, his arm draped along the back of the sofa behind El and his gangly knee resting against her side, but she didn't react.

"Yeah, but..."

He let out a short sigh and Will saw his soft expression.

"I don't know. It was... tough, right?"

He spoke softly. Will glanced at the girl whose eyes were closed and then sadly back at Mike.

"Yeah..."

Will had been living with El for the past six months. Mike wondered.

"Has she ever spoken about anything with you? About the lab?"

"Not directly, but I've heard her. At night."

Mike's brow creased.

"Nightmares?"

Will nodded.

"One time she asked me to stay with her... Must have been bad."

Mike sighed heavily and brushed his hand through his dark locks.

"Shit, Will, I just... I mean, part of me wants to hear everything that happened day by day, every detail so that, y'know, so that we could help her. But I don't know, at the same time I just want us to be able to wipe away all those years she was in that place."

He turned to his best friend.

"Is that crazy?"

Will understood.

"No, that's not crazy. Not at all."

He wished he could do the exact same thing. The Upside Down, The Mind Flayer. The way it felt to be burning alive on the inside... Everything.

"I mean, I always imagined what could have happened to her. When we first found her, when we were looking for you; her hair, the way she spoke, how she was afraid of... everything... And the way she was talking today... It was- it was-"

Will gulped through the lump that had formed in his throat.

"Torture."

He finished for his older friend and looked up see Mike staring back at him through moist eyes. The weight of everything instantly being dropped on them like torrential rain.

"Tor... ture?"

Both boys glanced up to see Eleven's puzzled expression. Had she been awake this whole time and just resting?

Mike moved closer and glanced at Will before answering.

"Y-Yeah. Do you know what that means?"

El shook her head.

God, how could they possibly explain to a kid who didn't understand the meaning of a word directly because of what that word meant?

"El, torture is when... when somebody does really really bad things to someone else because they want something from them."

El's brow furrowed over her dark eyes. That definitely sounded familiar.

"Hurt them?"

"Yes, hurt physically, but it can also hurt... in here."

Will accentuated his words by pointing at his temple. She looked at his head.

"Like The Mind Flayer did to you."

The girl surmised at which Will looked up at Mike in surprise. Mike placed his hand on his girlfriend's knee, causing her to turn to him.

"Right, El, but we're talking about you and what you told us all earlier."

Eleven didn't say anything. She knew what he was referring to, but she didn't want to think about those things again.

"Do you remember when we first met and I asked you to get in the closet to hide from my Mom?"

Will was curious. He had never heard this story.

El broke eye contact with Mike and looked down at his chest.

"Yes."

"And do you remember how you felt when you were in there?"

Both boys watched how her eyes somehow became even darker than they were already.

"Couldn't breathe... Thought you left me... Like they always did."

It hurt Mike to hear that she thought he would do that, but he didn't blame her.

"Right. El, I can still picture you when I opened the closet door and saw you on the floor."

He remembered how her big, glassy eyes looked up at him in complete surprise when he had returned to her.

"It's because of what they did to you. Locking you away in the dark room, drugging you, hurting you for so long. That's why sometimes you can't breathe and why you have nightmares."

Will could feel his eyes begin to sting. He reached forward and placed his hand on her other knee.

"I feel it too. After everything that happened over the last two years... Hop told my Mom it's called PTSD."

Her brother explained to her.

"It happens to people who..."

He began, but Mike finished.

"It happens to people who've been hurt. Really badly. It sometimes feels like it's happening again."

It was a lot for Eleven to take in, but she understood everything that both boys had told her. She blinked slowly and sucked in her bottom lip for a moment before letting a breath out through her nose.

"I was... tortured."

It stung. Hearing her say those words was heartbreaking, but it was actually comforting at the same time.

Even though she knew what she went through was wrong, having this new word to describe everything made her feel strange.

"El, I'm proud of you."

She turned and looked up at Mike with a puzzled expression. She saw her boyfriend looking down at her nodding.

"We both are."

He gestured to Will who nodded also.

"We know it was really difficult for you, but talking about what happened helps."

"Yeah. It means you don't have to deal with everything yourself."

Will added and smiled at his sister.

"So, any time you don't feel good or like you're back in that place I want you to talk to me or Will. Okay?"

Eleven took a moment to contemplate if she could see herself actually being able to do that, but she nodded.

"Do you promise?"

She nodded again and smiled slightly.

"Promise."

Mike returned her smile and reached forward to hug her. He extended his long arm and pulled Will toward him too so that all three of them were enveloped in a warm embrace.

"You don't have to be alone with this anymore."

They stayed knit together for as long a time until they naturally

pulled apart.

"Even though we weren't there with you then, we're right here now."

Mike assured her.

"Always."

Will added, both boys smiling at her. El felt warmth inside of her chest and nodded.

As midnight rolled around they arranged the blankets on the floor next to where El's fort was still set up so that it was larger to accommodate for how much bigger the teens had become and that there were three of them this time.

Both Mike and Will lay down on either side of El and she felt like nobody could touch her. Nobody could get her down here. She felt both boys' breaths even and their soft breaths against her.

Just then she thought back to her first night here, during the storm, as she hugged her knees to her chest and lay awake all night crying through the thunder. A little ball of anxiety and pain.

Now, she still felt those things, but this time she had friends and family that would be right by her side.

Always.

5. Together

The Byers' visit to Hawkins had come to an end and after some difficult goodbyes, despite the promise of another visit in a few months, they set off on their way back to their new home.

The house that they lived in now was a bit bigger than before. Even though Joyce hadn't planned to have an extra member in her family when they moved here, she was glad of the extra space.

Will and Eleven shared a bedroom which neither minded. They were actually happy about it. It gave them a chance to really bond as brother and sister because there was always something to be said for sleeping close to someone. There was a vulnerability in trusting somebody enough that you could sleep near them. And El had always been alone so it was nice to know that Will was there. And because El had saved Will's life twice he felt a safety with her next to him at night.

She had also become used to the new dynamic she had been thrown into with the Byers. Although she deeply missed Hopper and felt like a piece was missing from her without having him there, she was glad to have a mother in her life she could talk to and go to for comfort. She had always remembered how gentle and kind Joyce had been to her back at the school.

Jonathan was a good big brother to her. Since he first met her he felt protective of her and during the events with Billy and the Mind Flayer was when those feelings really kicked in. Cutting her leg open and feeling around through her muscle and tendons was something he would never forget. He felt horrible, but he was glad he was able to help and she had thanked him for what he did when they were all in the ambulances after the battle at the mall.

No, this family wasn't perfect, but they were perfect for each other.

They arrived back to their house pretty late in the evening and the journey had been long, so they said their good nights and retired for the night.

Will finished pulling his white pajama shirt over his head as El lay in bed on her side, facing him. He made his way to his bed and lay down under the covers, facing El too.

"You didn't want to leave, did you?"

He asked her. She blinked over at him and eventually shook her head.

"Yeah. Me neither."

The moonlight swept in through the window and shone over both kids.

"Will?"

Her voice was small.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, El. Anything."

Neither of them were tired, perhaps a result of being overtired.

"What was... your dad like?"

The question caught the boy completely off guard.

"Um, well..."

The girl remained quiet, letting him form his answer. She had never heard any mention of the man.

"To be honest, I don't really know. I didn't have much of a relationship with him."

El furrowed her brow.

"Bad?"

Will thought about that for a moment.

"Well, he never hit me or anything, but... I guess he didn't really care about me."

"Didn't care?"

El sat up and leaned on her elbow. Will did the same.

"Yeah, I mean... he always wanted me to be into baseball and sports. You know, things that boys should be into. Jonathan too. He even took him out shooting a few times, but always told me he never really liked it."

The boy shifted his eyes down and let out a sigh.

"Kinda glad he left us."

Eleven immediately remembered when Hopper had said those exact same words when talking about Sarah.

"Gone?"

Will nodded absentmindedly, but after a moment he caught onto what El had meant.

"Oh, no. He's alive. Just moved away."

Eleven mulled over what she was just told.

"Mouth breather..."

That made Will snicker.

"Yeah. Mouth breather."

Even in the dim light he could see his sister smiling at him. He felt the same smile reach his own face.

"My turn."

El turned her head to the side in confusion.

"Can I ask you something?"

Will clarified.

"Yes."

She replied.

"Were you... were you born in the lab?"

Eleven blinked a few times before going inside herself.

"Mmm... no other memories so... I think so."

Will nodded.

"And did you ever meet any other kids? Like One to Ten?"

El looked at him, but hesitated.

"What?"

He saw the anxiety in her dark eyes from across the room.

"Only one. I met Eight... but not there. Not really."

"What do you mean?"

She had never mentioned her adventure after meeting her mother for the first time. Not even to Hopper.

"Last year, after I went to see Mama... I went to... Chicago. To see Eight."

"Woah, you went all the way to Chicago by yourself?"

She looked down and nodded, knowing it was a stupid thing to do.

"So, What was she like?"

El thought back to the older girls' mannerisms. Her voice, her clothes, her power.

"She was... fa- familiar."

"Did she have powers like you?"

She nodded.

"She... she could make people see things. Things that aren't there."

"Woah. That's so cool."

El thought about that night on the rooftop and about the beautiful blue butterfly that flew out of Kali's hand.

"She made me see a butterfly."

The smile that had graced her lips soon faded as she thought about what else she did.

Will could see her eyes darken.

"What is it, El?"

"She made me see Papa."

He felt his own brows furrow at the thought.

"But, why would she do that? I mean, of all people, she would understand the effect he has on you."

She shifted her gaze to him.

"That's why. She wanted to kill the bad men. The men who hurt us. And Mama... but I don't want to kill. So... she made me see Papa. He said that I was afraid. He said... I had 'a wound.' That it would... kill me..."

Will saw the inner battle going on inside his sister's head.

"So I left."

She looked up her brother.

"I came back so I could save you. So that I could save our friends."

She smiled sadly. Will wordlessly got out of his own bed and made

his way over to her. He sat beside her and took her hand.

"Thank you, El. For saving me. Twice."

She looked at him through warm eyes for a second before looking down. She had trouble accepting thanks or any type of compliment. She simply wasn't used to it so her eye contact was rarely maintained.

But she looked troubled.

"Will... I think Papa is still alive."

The boy felt his heart skip. Although he hadn't met Brenner, he was told how sadistic he was and he saw first-hand the effects of the abuse he had inflicted on Eleven.

"What? But Mike said the Demogorgon got him. At the school."

The troubled look didn't fade from her face.

"In Chicago, the Bad Man said... he said he knew where he was. He said he could take me to him."

Will sat back and let out a short breath.

"Shit..."

El nodded slowly.

After a moment of silence Will leaned forward, determined, and gripped his sister's knee from over the sheet.

"He can't get to you, El. He has no idea where you are. And even if he did, he'd never get past Mom."

That made Eleven smile. She could picture Joyce barricading the door and standing guard with an axe.

She softened her posture and leaned forward, resting her hand over Will's.

"Thank you for being my brother."

With their warm exchange lay the promise of getting a good night's rest, which was rare for these two deeply troubled kids. Between them, the amount of trauma they had endured was almost unbelievable.

But together, they would get through it. They had the capability to distract themselves, sometimes enough to pretend like they were normal teenagers and sleep soundly.

Unfortunately, this night would not be one of those nights.

It was dark. Like a giant storm. Red and blue glowing behind giant grey clouds. He recognized those clouds. They made him feel like he couldn't breathe. Like he was suffocating. And no matter where he ran or hid he would be found. And taken away.

He tried nonetheless. He ran as fast as he could, but he could feel the presence behind him. Right behind him. Grabbing at him.

And just when he felt a shiver as he was reached, when he would usually snap awake, he didn't.

It was darkness again. Only this time, despite being in pitch black, he could feel the claustrophobia. He reached out his hands and could touch both walls.

Panic began to rise in his chest, but just as he was about to stand, he felt hands on him. They felt like weights holding him down.

He struggled as hard as he could, but it felt like there were about ten pairs of hands pushing against his body.

All of a sudden, a blinding light flashed and he could make out a presence above him. A shadow. For a moment he thought it was the Mind Flayer, but once his eyes focused again he immediately recognized who it was despite not ever meeting him before.

The white hair. Those cold eyes.

"Papa."

He said, only it wasn't his voice. He stared up at the looming man, a terrifying grin on his face.

"Eleven..."

Just as the man was about to touch him, he jolted awake. His back as straight as a board as he sat up in his bed panting and sweating.

What was that? The first half of his nightmare he recognized. It was part of his recurring dreams that he'd been having all year. But what he just saw. It was...

"Papa."

He turned instantly and saw the girl next to him shifting in her bed. He scrambled over to her and saw the sheen of sweat on her skin. He then was suddenly more aware of how his own saturated shirt clung to his body.

The girls eyes were tightly closed and she was breathing shallowly.

"El? Hey, can you hear me?"

He placed a hand on her shoulder, but she was none the wiser.

"L-Let go. Let go of m-me."

For a split second, Will thought she was talking to him, but then he had an image form in his head of those hands holding him down in the darkness.

He knew where she was because he had just been there. Only while he woke up as soon as he was touched, El didn't get to escape that easily. She had to continue through that torment.

"El, listen to me. It's Will. Listen to what I'm saying."

Eleven whimpered, but suddenly her hand reached up and grabbed his shirt, balling her fist into the damp fabric. He took his hand from her shaking shoulder and placed it on her wrist.

"Eleven, you're not there anymore. You're home. He can't get you

anymore, okay? You're safe with me. I'm right here."

He reached down with his free hand and placed it gently on her chest. He instantly felt her heart beating a mile a minute.

She flinched at his touch, but didn't pull away.

"W-Will...?"

She was awake, but her eyes remained closed as if she was being gripped by her leg and pulled back into the darkness.

But Will wouldn't let that happen. He'd felt it too many times before.

"I can feel you, okay? Your breathing. Your heartbeat."

He was out of breath himself. Sharing his sister's panic and disorientation. And then automatically he let his head slowly fall down and rested his forehead against hers.

"You're okay... You're okay..."

After a moment of ever slowing breaths against their faces, El peeled her eyes open.

"I'm okay..."

Will pulled slowly away from her and looked down into her troubled dark eyes. She searched through his, recognizing a concerned expression.

"I-I saw clouds. Blue and red. Running..."

Will felt something rush through him. He couldn't quite explain the feeling.

"El, I saw him. In the dark room. It was like I was you."

She blinked slowly up at him.

"We... shared the same dream?"

Her small voice asked.

"I... I think so."

Will, completely drained, fell back onto El's bed beside her. They were both small kids so it wasn't uncomfortable.

"But how?"

He stared up at the ceiling, almost in disbelief.

"I've no idea."

There was a silence.

"Shared trauma."

Will turned at his sister's words. Her face was turned to him, but her eyes weren't really focused.

"I heard Jonathan say it to Nancy."

Will smiled sadly.

"El, the next time you're back at that place, in your head... I'll be right there with you. Don't worry."

She focused on him this time and saw his sweet smile, and she couldn't help return the gesture.

"Me too. When you're running... from the storm... I'll be right beside you."

He reached forward and took her hand in his.

"I love you, El."

She felt the grip on her hand tighten.

"I love you too."

He had a sister now. They didn't know her exact birthday, and even though they were born in the same year, he liked the idea of calling her his baby sister.

"Stay here?"

She asked him. He shifted a little closer and savoured the shared feeling of warmth between them.

"Stay here."

He assured her as they both drifted away into a dreamland that they now shared.

Together.